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Oral History Transcript of Louis J. Lefkowitz

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview

of

The Honorable Louis J. Lefkowitz

by

Robert H. Cooper, Jr.

on

March 3, 1989

Cooper: This is Robert Cooper, and I am recording an interview with General Louis J. Lefkowitz at his home. The date is March 3, 1989. General Lefkowitz, I know that you attended the evening division (at Fordham Law School) from 1922 to 1925.

Lefkowitz: Yes, Sir.

Cooper: There are several subjects that I thought that I might bring up, and I know that there are several subjects that you would like to talk about. I was first interested -- having been a night student myself -- how did you integrate holding a full-time job and doing all your classwork, your homework, and things like that? And I think it would be of interest to so many alumni if you could talk about what you did during full-time employment (while) you were a student at night.

Lefkowitz: It was extremely difficult. I don't want to be boasting about it. I got up early in the morning ... I had to be there at nine o'clock in the morning. The office was located at 15 Park Row. It was right across the street from the Law School. It was very tough. I did without my dinner at night. I worked till about quarter to six and

ran across the street to make the evening session. Then, I went to the automat at 15 Park Row. There used to be an automat downstairs.

Cooper: A Horn and Hardhart?

Lefkowitz: Yes. Dinner consisted of a sandwich, a cup of coffee ... I didn't get home till about twelve or one o'clock at night. I went out to serve summonses. I went to law school until nine o'clock at night. In serving summonses, I went up to the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and I got paid for making service. The irony about serving summons is you were not paid unless you served the summons.

Cooper: So if the person was not served, there was no money to be paid.

Lefkowitz: Oh, yes. I hung around ... or I tried to affect service on another summons elsewhere. I did two or three summons a night. I didn't go every night. Probably four or five nights per week. A very tough thing. I didn't get home until about eleven or eleven-thirty.

Cooper: This was like every night?

Lefkowitz: Yes, except Saturday and Sunday ... Very, very tough ... extremely tough. It's hard to describe. I got home about eleven-thirty or twelve o'clock at night and sat down and worked till two, three o'clock in the morning. Got up at seven-thirty, eight o'clock to make nine o'clock at the office. Very tough; I worked half a day Saturday and Sunday, the balance of the time I did my studying.

Cooper: No, it's a fascinating thing.

Lefkowitz: Going to school and serving summons ... I did that for three years. Or if (I) had some exams coming, I'd probably duck going out some night or going out every night.

Lefkowitz: I was a law clerk. While this was tough, it was invaluable to be a law clerk. I learned so much. It made my studying a lot easier. Plus, I was not a graduate of college. Most of the students were graduates of college. Very few students were high school graduates. I was too young to go to law school, and I had to wait about a year and a half. I got out of high school when I was sixteen, sixteen and a half.

Cooper: You graduated from the High School of Commerce?

Lefkowitz: Commerce, yes. Then I had to wait to take the bar exam until I was twenty-one. I picked Fordham Law School ... I don't know why.

Cooper: A good choice.

Lefkowitz: Extremely. I couldn't pick a better choice and [of course] you know where 15 Park Row was?

Cooper: Yes, sir.

Lefkowitz: Right across the street. Five, seven minutes to run across, get an elevator. It was perfect. Couldn't be better.

Cooper: Let me ask you, what was your salary for this very, very hard job?

Lefkowitz: I was a big shot. I got five dollars a week. Then when I told my boss -- I had two employers, one was Jacob Kirschenbaum; the other was Herman Kahn. I told them I could type. They said, "You type, and we'll give you three dollars more in salary ..." That gave me eight dollars as a law clerk-stenographer. I took Gregg shorthand, too, at that time. I learned that in the High School of

Commerce.

Cooper: That was very valuable, then?

Lefkowitz: Oh, yes. I used that in everything I was ever taught.

Cooper: Did you use that in law school?

Lefkowitz: Oh, yes. That was a big, big help. I was only a high school graduate, and the shorthand was a big help or I couldn't keep up with my notes ... No one else could read my notes ... Only I could read my notes ... When summertime came I worked during the summer ... I read some cases there; I learned some law; I developed a fondness for the law, an appreciation ... I'll never tell anyone not to become a law clerk. I'm a firm believer in getting a year or two of clerkship ... something you don't get in law school.

Cooper: So you had the best of both worlds: the academic side, and at the same time, the practical side.

Lefkowitz: Yes, and the teaching staff couldn't have been better. The Fordham staff was supreme ... An ideal staff ... The teachers that we had: John Loughran, who

became the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals; I. Maurice Wormser, Professor Wormser, very good, John Blake, member of the Board of Law Examiners; Dean Wilkinson; Ralph Kane; Smythe for contracts, Smythe; great staff, just couldn't be beat. The staff was just wonderful. Good teachers, well recognized in their field, and they knew how to teach.

Cooper: What was your course load like. How many hours per week did you actually spend in class?

Lefkowitz: I think it was from six to nine. Each subject was an hour. A little recess for five minutes in between. I think it was three subjects a night. Classes took about fifty-five minutes. Fifty minutes or an hour.

Cooper: Did you go three or four nights a week?

Lefkowitz: I went every night.

Cooper: Monday through Friday.

Lefkowitz: Right. It was really nothing to talk about, but I was a youngster, just barely eighteen. It was tough, but if you got by the first year you were all right.

No guarantee, but you were pretty well (inaudible) if you got past the first year... There were ninety percent college graduates in my class ... from Fordham, up at the Hill... We had a good class, very active at Fordham. Charles E. Murphy was our class president, a great man. A great advertising man. A college graduate ... I don't know of many classmates of mine who are still alive, maybe one or two. Some, of course, I see them once in a while, but the class does not come to the Fordham luncheon. This is the first time I will miss the Annual Luncheon.

Cooper: I'd like to know something about the composite of the class, like the age range of the student body.

Lefkowitz: Most of them were college graduate. I figure they were at least twenty-two to twenty-four or twenty-one to twenty-five, when they entered law school. From the world of advertising, business people ... had some great people. I remember Charles E. Murphy was our class president. Charlie Ramsey was one of our class presidents. Edward McDonald was one of our class presidents. Oliver Brooks, Chris McGrath who became a surrogate in the Bronx; he was in my class We had a couple of fellows who became judges ...

Cooper: Let me ask you, what kind of occupations... Were there other law clerks like you?

Lefkowitz: Oh, no. Very few law clerks. They had jobs in as business executives in the commercial field. Some were in the law -- went into the law like I did, but most of them were not in law.

Cooper: Approximately, what was the size of the student body, then?

Lefkowitz: I'm trying to guess. I would put it somewhere from upwards of 200.

Cooper: Did you generally take all classes together? The same curriculum?

Lefkowitz: Yeah. I think we were in the same room. The teacher came to us. We were in the same class.

Cooper: And that was in the Woolworth Building?

Lefkowitz: The Woolworth Building. The Law School occupied the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth floors.

Cooper: What was the library like.

Lefkowitz: Not as much as you got now. Old Ben was our Librarian. Used to call him Ben. An old gent. He taught us a lot. It was a very modest library. We had about eight to ten rooms at the most. Anywhere from six to ten rooms.

Cooper: Some professors, today, contend that women are the better law students. What do you think about that?

Lefkowitz: They were just as good as the men. When I became Attorney General, I gave many women a position in my office. I gave many women an opportunity to join my staff.

Cooper: That's wonderful.

Lefkowitz: That's to my credit. I'm proud that those women became good lawyers -- just as good as men. They make excellent lawyers. We could have had at the most eight to ten women in my class. That was a small number out of a class of about 100.

Cooper: That is certainly a tribute to you ... We have so many facilities at Fordham Law School today, such as a huge

cafeteria, [how did that compare with your days]?

Lefkowitz: I didn't know they had a cafeteria. I used to eat in the automat. A sandwich and a cup of coffee to carry me through, till about midnight when I got home ...

Cooper: Did the Law School occupy one or two floors of the building?

Lefkowitz: I think it was two floors.

Cooper: And there were a number of classrooms?

Lefkowitz: Yes.

Cooper: Could you tell me what exams were like?

Lefkowitz: I can't remember much about the exams, [except] that they were very important ...

Cooper: Was there a high attrition rate? Did most people graduate?

Lefkowitz: Yes, a few left voluntarily after the first year. A few, not many.

Cooper: Such a difficult and punishing schedule.

Lefkowitz: Oh, terrible ... Practically everyone who went there worked during the day. I was a clerk. Fordham accorded me an opportunity for which I'm very grateful. Always will be.

Cooper: What was the tuition?

Lefkowitz: I don't know, think it could have been around ... I'm going to guess. It could have been about two hundred dollars for the whole year.

Cooper: How did you get your books?

Lefkowitz: There was a bookstore. Sometimes you bought books from a student of the year before. You wanted to save money if you were a first year student. They were all marked up if you bought them. Underlines, underlines. That's how you saved a few dollars.

Cooper: I know there wasn't much time for social get-togethers, but I did hear about the Tortfeasors' Club.

Lefkowitz: That's the famous club. Headed by Charles E. Murphy; he was our class president. The teachers came to a dinner once a year. It was a great party, just great. Pretty-well attended by almost everybody. Limited to my class. Some outsiders, too. The teachers all came. They all enjoyed it. We enjoyed having them, too. Great class.

Cooper: After law school, did you keep up the club?

Lefkowitz: We did keep it up. The class, itself, kept together, and it died out as people got older.

Cooper: Where did you meet?

Lefkowitz: Different restaurants.

Cooper: Do any professors stand out in you mind, as helping to focus your career?

Lefkowitz: Judge John Loughran was a great example. And Professor Maurice Wormser. I think that everyone of the teachers was a good example. The faculty which was teaching was unusual. They were very friendly, very social--not stiff.

Cooper: What was Dean Wilkinson like?

Lefkowitz: A wonderful person; Judge Joseph Crater also taught our class.

Cooper: And Francis X. Carmody who wrote the famous practice and procedure book.

Lefkowitz: Yes ... Great ... Fabulous.

Cooper: And Maurice Wormser?

Lefkowitz: Yes, he was the editor of the New York Law Journal. He had trouble with his voice; a good teacher. And another Professor was Henry Mannix.

Cooper: Since you have had such a long association with Fordham Law School, I wonder what are some of the special feelings that you have for the school?

Lefkowitz: Well, the good comradeship. I knew several fellows in the first year class, but ninety percent of the class I did not know at all. I was of the Jewish faith, as you know. Most of the boys were of the Catholic faith.

They didn't ask you what your faith was, but it was evident by your name. No trouble. None. I never saw anything take place. If I did notice something from some fellows, I stayed away. That was to a minimum. Nothing like that existed. I'll say that is to Fordham's credit. A hundred percent. It was Catholic oriented. The teaching was excellent; the comradeship was wonderful. No incident in the school ever made me feel uncomfortable.

Cooper: That's wonderful to hear ... General Lefkowitz, where were you living during this period?

Lefkowitz: In a tenement building, a cold-water flat. With my mother and father, brother and sister.

Cooper: Where was this located?

Lefkowitz: Four thirty-two East Houston Street... The building's torn down now, but I can still spot the place. I go by there once a year. I go to Ratner's once in a while for dinner on Delancey Street; it's a well-known restaurant.

Cooper: Did you work on Sunday also?

Lefkowitz: Sometimes, you just can't physically do it.

Cooper: Did [the professors] keep you on your feet? Did you have to get up?

Lefkowitz: They certainly did. You had to recite what you read. We studied the case method. Do you have the case method there?

Cooper: Yes, sir. They still do ... Would [the professors] keep after you sometimes?

Lefkowitz: Depends on who the teacher was ... Some professors spoke more than others ... some let the students do the teaching ... That's going back a couple of years ...

Cooper: You're doing a very good job.

Lefkowitz: I'll tell you how proud I am of Fordham University. They gave me my start in life. I always referred to Fordham wherever I went.

I gave many students from Fordham Law School a position in my office when I served as Attorney General.

John Feerick works hard...They have a nickname for him.

Cooper: John-the-Good?

Lefkowitz: (laughing) John-the-Good, that's it.

Cooper: At the annual luncheon a few years ago, perhaps Judge McLaughlin--I'm not sure--coined that phrase.

Lefkowitz: Yes, Judge McLaughlin; he was a great dean and is a great judge. They all have a sense of humor: Judge Mulligan, Judge McLaughlin and Dean Feerick.

Cooper: Certainly are. [At the annual luncheon] they have a front row of speakers that...

Lefkowitz: Excellent, excellent! I'm sorry I can't go this year. Jim Gill is being honored ...

Cooper: Let me ask you ... At the Law School, we have such an active, terrific career planning and placement organization that helps our graduates ... How did you get your first job?

Lefkowitz: Well, that's a long story. I was not doing very much as a young lawyer. I had very few clients. I joined the local Republican club. In those days, there was the high tariff and the low tariff. The difference between the Democrat and Republican parties was that one believed in the high tariff and one believed in low tariff. In a district of a thousand people, I canvassed, knocking on every door, asking for their vote. I am in the 6th Assembly District in Manhattan which had about 20,000 registrants. I personally canvassed as many votes as I could and had all my friends help me out. Because my opponent was an incumbent assemblyman for six years, I was shocked when I was elected. The headline in the newspaper said, "Eastside Republican Wins." That's how I started. One year terms in those days--the term of office was one year.

Cooper: So you constantly had to campaign?

Lefkowitz: From the day I won, I had to campaign for next year; the day after election. I served under Alfred E. Smith who was then Governor, in 1928. He was a great man. He said to me, "You were elected as a Republican. Don't let it ever happen again...." We had no mikes and we had to speak off a truck on the corners.